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SUBJECT: BULGARIA: GOVERNMENT DOWNPLAYS DIASPORA MINISTER'S
COMMENTS ON TURKEY

REF: 09 SOFIA 000511

Classified By: CDA Susan Sutton for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Controversial Diaspora Minister Bozhidar Dimitrov is in hot water with Prime Minister Boyko Borissov over his recent comments about Turkey. During a nationally televised interview on January 5, Dimitrov threatened that Bulgaria would block Turkey's EU candidacy if it did not pay nearly USD 20 billion in property compensation dating back to the Second Balkan War in 1913. His comments angered Turkish authorities, as well as the Bulgarian PM, who quickly issued a statement denying this precondition. Further, Borissov warned Dimitrov that this was the last time he would tolerate such cavalier remarks, and threatened to dismiss Dimitrov, his personal friend and controversial "Minister without Portfolio." The MFA also distanced itself from Dimitrov's comments. The Turkey compensation issue is popular with nationalists and revanchists, such as Dimitrov, and has attracted occasional interest even from some mainstream politicians particularly since 2008, when the European Parliament included the "Thracian issue" in its report on Turkey's progress to EU accession. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

12. (C) Dimitrov's comments center around the unresolved dispute over property compensation for the "Thracian Refugees," the approximately six-hundred thousand Bulgarians who fled Eastern Thrace (modern-day Turkey) in the aftermath of the Second Balkan War in 1913. In 1925, Bulgaria and Turkey signed the Treaty of Angora, a bilateral agreement guaranteeing pre-1912 property rights for ethnic Bulgarians. To date, the treaty commitments remain unfulfilled. In the 1980s, Bulgaria estimated property values at around USD 10 billion, a figure that Dimitrov arbitrarily doubled in his interview to USD 20 billion, owing in part to accrued interest. In 2007, the "Thracian Refugee" issue reappeared in a motion to the European Parliament by two Bulgarian MEPs. An amendment was subsequently included in the European Parliament's report on Turkey's progress to EU accession. Bulgarian MEP and amendment co-author Evgeni Kirilov told us that a bilateral working group was convened in May 2009 to discuss the issue, but no progress was achieved. With the exception of Dimitrov's recent comments, since the 1990s, governments from both Bulgaria and Turkey have publicly downplayed the issue.

COMMENT

13. (C) On the surface, it appears that the populist historian Dimitrov is merely up to his old tricks, speaking out of turn, and again causing headaches for the MFA and his friend the Prime Minister (reftel). However, Dimitrov's antics could provide political cover for those interested in re-introducing the contentious issue. The plight of the

"Thracian Refugees" still resonates with many Bulgarians, including mainstream officials such as current Minister of Defense Nikolay Mladenov, who, as an MEP, had a role in the drafting the 2007 amendment. For now, it appears the government will downplay the issue ahead of PM Borissov's rumored upcoming visit to Turkey.

SUTTON